Pedersen, Courtney (2010) "Virginia's Secret" in *LEVEL Launch Exhibition* catalogue, Brisbane: LEVELari.

**Virginia's Secret**

What does it mean to be establishing an art space devoted to the work of women in the second decade of the 21st century? Is it still necessary?

The notion of a women's space for art making and exhibition was a mainstay of second wave feminist art practise. When the trail-blazing Artists-in-Residence (or AIR) opened in New York in 1973, it promised a non-commercial, communal alternative to the gallery system as it stood at that time. Unexpectedly, AIR still exists today, with a new location but still using the system it established of gallery membership and juried exhibitions. AIR provided a model for numerous women's galleries internationally through the 1970s and 80s.

When the artist, Jenny Watson returned from a trip to New York in the mid Seventies, she reported what she had seen for the Australian feminist art journal, *Lip*. Women's art collectives and galleries were an essential part of the terrain at that time and Watson was impressed by the progress that had been made in the United States. Virginia Woolf famously proposed in the late1920s that in order to be truly successful in a creative life, women had to have access to a room of their own. While Woolf's argument related to a space free of domestic responsibility and an income to support their ambitions, her work *A Room of One's Own* was a clarion call to second wave feminists to establish women-only organisations and facilities.

Spaces like the Adelaide Women's Art Movement venues and later, the Women's Gallery in Fitzroy, Melbourne were Australia's contribution to this trend, but like Women's Rooms in Universities, they were sometimes the target of resentment and belittling criticism. It was argued by some that women's galleries were only ever marginal to the main game of the art market and consequently could not necessarily be taken seriously. It was a self-fulfilling critique that excluded women only spaces from the field of contemporary art.

LEVEL differs from those early experiments in women's space in a number of ways. It is not necessarily aimed at breaking down the systems and logic of the contemporary art world as we know it, so much as offering the facilities and atmosphere where female artists and arts professionals can potentially flourish. This atmosphere is envisaged as one of sorority and collegiality, collaboration and mutual career development.

It seemed through the 1990s and early years of this century that women artists were no longer interested in considering the role that gender plays in the formation of their careers. During the enthusiasm for so-called postfeminism, women artists were supposedly casting off the dowdy shackles of the women's art movement and embracing their 'bad girl' side, conveniently forgetting the bad girls of the previous women's art movement. Young women artists of the Nineties and Noughties took the marketing fantasy of a Victoria's Secret catalogue and reclaimed it as the material of their own practise. Women's galleries and studios largely disappeared from the landscape as the next wave of women artists found their way into the mainstream, thanks to the efforts of their predecessors. So why should young women now feel the need to once again embrace Woolf's plea for a room of their own?

It is hard to cling to the view, as Lucy Lippard argued in 1973, that museums are "discriminatory, usually under the guise of being discriminating"[i] when women artists are now so visible in major collections. It requires us to dig down into the statistics of the transition from art education to practising artist to see how many women fall by the wayside. In my own experience as an educator, I still observe that it is female students who are more likely to be juggling parenting with their studies, it is female students who are more likely to doubt their own abilities, and it is female students who are more likely to be looking for the 'safety clause' or the parallel training that will prepare them for a job other than artist. Museum acquisitions might now be approaching something closer to fifty percent, but when women make up well *over* half of art school enrolments, we can see that male graduates are still disproportionately represented in the art world.

At the heart of this disproportionate 'failure' of many women artists is the tenacious belief that artists must be willing to work alone and without the reassurance of work or income stability. This belief was starkly expressed in the early part of last century by Australian art figure, Max Meldrum. His belief was that the social connectivity of women was their greatest handicap: "Every great painter had to be able to walk out under the stars alone, with no companion, no guide and just go along his chosen path. No woman could do this."[ii]

There is still the lingering opinion that the great artist must sever ties with all others to realise their full potential. The romance of this is beguiling, but no artist has ever really succeeded without the support and assistance of others, whether spouses, curators or critics. The 'man alone' fantasy was always an illusion that required elimination.

LEVEL offers the possibility of a transparent system of mutual support, aimed at overcoming some of the complicated barriers that women still encounter in the art world. This desire to level the playing field seems like a savvy reappraisal of the strategies of that earlier wave of women artists. It appears that this generation no longer feels the need to deny the influence of feminist art tactics, and that they have once again embraced Virginia's secret.

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[i] Kingsley, A., 2001. Women Choose Women. In P. Phelan & H. Reckitt, eds. *Art and Feminism*. London: Phaidon, p. 207.

[ii] Rentschler, R., 2006. Women's art as indicator of social change. *Australian Cultural History*, (24), p.122